

Conversation Hour in the Academic Library

A Getting Started Guide

Conversation programming is library programming that supports English language learners. Typically, this programming has often been conducted in public libraries, where librarians or volunteers host a small group session, either in person or on a video-conferencing platform, for English language learners to practice listening and speaking skills. For the academic library, conversation programming is an increasingly relevant program as the immigrant-origin student populations continue to grow.¹ However, moving from a traditional conversation programming curriculum to one tailored to the academic population requires some thought and preparation. In the Winterim semester of 2022–2023, I started a Conversation Hour program at the Scott Community College (SCC) Library at the request of a student, which has grown to be a useful tool as we build a pipeline from our non-credit to credit English-language learner classes. The following are my reflections that will hopefully provide insight for community colleges that offer both non-credit adult education and credit ELL classes to consider adding a program to support their English language learner population.

Creating the Program

In preparation, I observed two programs from public libraries that still held their conversation hour programming in an online format. This, and the consent of the programming library, were the only two criteria I had for choosing a program to observe. After searching the online calendars of various public libraries and contacting the program facilitator, I was able to sit in on two sessions: one with the Brooklyn Public Library and one with the Orange County Public Library. To both libraries and to the amazing librarians and volunteers who put on conversation programs, I am incredibly grateful, as the observations allowed me to develop a program that is useful to our student and public patrons.

The programs were almost perfectly opposite, giving them the opportunity to observe and take what I thought would work best for our population. The Brooklyn Public Library program was incredibly structured; the volunteer who ran the program created a lesson plan with lesson objectives, which was followed from start to finish. Vocabulary and grammatical structures addressed in the program were defined upfront, which often give students the feeling that they are learning something immediately applicable. This structured approach really allowed for the group to maximize their learning and may have lowered anxiety as it gave participants an opportunity to prepare for the type of language they would be using. The next program I reviewed was from the Orange County Public Library. This was run by a

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library staff member and was much more unstructured, so much so that students suggested topics as the program ran, giving students practice in authentic, organic conversations. In contrast to the Brooklyn Public Library program, vocabulary was addressed as it occurred in conversation.

I took away so many valuable lessons from my observations, including pacing and activities that I could immediately apply as I developed my own program. As I adapted from these two libraries, I also wanted to consider my audience. Since my program worked for both the non-credit adult education program, which had students whose goals range from wanting to go to college to wanting to enter the workforce to wanting to engage more fully in society, and the for-credit students, who were already enrolled in college, I thought a combination of the two programs was most appropriate. Students could practice having organic conversations in part of the program and we could practice more structured language development in part.

Choosing Modality

The conversation hour program is a one-hour session that runs on Tuesdays from 10 to 11 a.m. over Zoom. Each session consists of a conversation topic and a mini lesson. Examples of mini lessons include things like giving advice or summarizing. Typically, we do not extend the lesson beyond one session so that students can choose to attend every week or choose to drop-in when the program fits into their schedule.

Scott Community College has many satellite campuses, including the campus that runs the adult learner classes. Because of this, I thought a Zoom class would give students from all campuses the best ability to attend. However, there are many things to consider when choosing a modality: What are the goals of the program? If one goal is to build a supportive community for English language learners at a commuter campus, then an in-person option may be the best option for both practicing language acquisition and building a learner community. Another consideration: does the college layout support a centralized approach? In-person options allow students to get a feel for the college experience in a safe environment, so it might have more effective outcomes for moving from non-credit to credit side classes. However, if, like at SCC, the campuses are spread out, then a Zoom option would best maximize student's ability to participate.

Activities

From the start of the program, I began each session with a conversation topic. There are many sites with freely available conversation topic ideas online, but to differentiate for academic conversations, eliciting faculty suggestions might be a helpful resource as well. For example, a media literacy instructor was conducting a class on books and their relevance in contemporary society. She asked her class "Are books still relevant?" (luckily the students unanimously agreed they were), so I decided to use the same topic in my program so that the students were exposed to real topics they might have in their college classes. This also allowed us to explore current events, as the discussion of the relevancy of books naturally leads to the discussion around the recent phenomenon of book banning, which has been frequently in the news as of late.

Conversation topics are a nice way to get students warmed up for talking without having to think too much like explaining the rules of a game might require. I found the conversation

topics best for warmups are general and ease the students into talking. In one of the programs I observed, simply starting with “How are you?” worked nicely. For the academic crowd, maybe “How are classes going?” Be prepared to change tactics for each group, however. Some groups warm up better with structured activities. A game can help students think about creating one language structure at a time.

Games can also be differentiated for academic needs. For example, the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) requires the ability to craft an argument. One game we play together is “Hot Takes,” which asks students to debate the merits of something completely innocuous, such as “oatmeal raisin cookies are better than chocolate chip cookies.” Students learn the art of supporting their position with reason on a low-stakes topic while learning to organize their thoughts into a cohesive argument for the TOEFL’s opinion-based essay.

Here are some other example activities that I have used in Conversation Hour programs:

- 20 Questions: Helps students practice forming questions and thinking on the spot.
- Would You Rather: Helps students practice defending their position on something.
- Reading the News: Helps students practice reading aloud and I ask students to summarize afterward. Summarization is a requirement for the TOEFL speaking test.
- The Alphabet Game: Helps students with improvisational thinking.

There are many websites to help with programming and curriculum design for the adult English learner.² One trick for differentiating for the academic program is to study the materials that students might encounter. The academic word list can help show the vocabulary that a student might encounter in higher education, which can also be used to tailor an activity so that students might start encountering those words more often. Here is an example: play 20 Questions with the nouns on the academic word list, such as data, economy, function, theory, resource, credit, element, etc. This may be difficult at first, so you might need both to have a word bank and example questions that students can choose from, such as “Does it have to do with [math/science/language arts]?” or “Can you see it?” (because there are so many abstract nouns, you might also need to allow some leeway in answering, such as allowing “sometimes” or “parts of it”).

Marketing and Steady Attendance

Programming in the academic library is tricky because most patrons are students who are busy with their studies. It is easy for something like Conversation Hour to fall off a student’s radar as the semester progresses. On the one hand, it is important for the librarian or volunteer to understand this and give students grace and time to come and go as they need. One way the facilitator can respect this is by creating individual lessons that do not carry over week to week, giving students the opportunity to participate in each lesson without the need to have attended prior lessons.

There are also many students who want to participate, but due to their busy schedule, they simply forget. One technique I use to remind students is by using a mailing list. I collected student’s email addresses and sent reminders to our students the day before our Conversation Hour class. This helps put the program back on the patron’s radar without being too overwhelming. On one occasion, I forgot to send the reminder and there was a noticeable drop off in attendance.

Conclusion

The SCC Library Conversation Hour program has grown to about 25 interested students from both the credit and non-credit side of the college, with about six students regularly attending each week. Some of our Conversation Hour students have successfully enrolled and completed credit-side classes. One member has joined the library as a volunteer to gain work experience and continue practicing their speaking and listening skills. We plan to continue the program for the next semester, offering more time slots to accommodate morning and afternoon students.

To create an effective program, it is important for librarians to do some thinking and planning beforehand. One of the most helpful planning tips was reaching out to successful library programs and noting what works and how to pace a session. It was also necessary to establish student goals and needs and incorporate those into lessons. Active listening, being flexible, and trying new things are key to a conversation hour program. As we continue to add students in the future, we will tailor the programs to their needs and prepare our English language learners for work and higher education. Programming can be an important but often forgotten piece of the academic library puzzle, especially at the community college, but SCC Library has found that conversation hour programming can create a learner community within the student body. ✍

Notes

1. Migrationpolicy.org, “Unlocking Potential: The Growth of Immigrant-Origin Student Enrollment in U.S. Higher Education Holds Significant Implications for the Labor Market and Future Enrollment and Diversity,” October 2, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/unlocking-potential-immigrant-origin-students>.
2. Some of my go-to sites are Breaking News English and ESLgames.com.